



For the Sake of All Women

Jennifer M.T. Carter
discusses the life of Georgina
King (1845–1932),
Australia's first woman
geologist

Georgina King was born in Fremantle, Western Australia, on 6 June 1845. Her parents migrated to the Swan River Colony in 1841 where for eight years the Rev. George King conducted a vigorous mission, to both European settlers and Aboriginal people alike. Throughout her long life (she died one day after her eighty-seventh birthday in 1932), Georgina believed in the power of 'environment' in shaping our lives; this was certainly true of her own upbringing.

The preface to one of Georgina's publications, *The Mineral Wealth of New South Wales and Other Lands and Countries* (1911), describes a family who held the natural sciences in high regard. 'When botany was in its infancy', Georgina's grandmother went everywhere with pocket hand

lens at the ready, while in Fremantle, half a world away and decades later, her mother, Jane, 'took great delight in the native flowers, which she painted most beautifully'. (Less typically, Jane learned how to 'preserve birds and reptiles' and became 'a good taxidermist' as well.) Mrs King was not alone in her pursuit of nature. From the earliest days of white settlement, women had carried on a European tradition and collected specimens for serious botanical study, and their contribution to the scientific knowledge of our strangely unique Australian flora was increasingly valued, if not always put on record. Few women, in fact, aspired to be recognised as scientists per se—and if they did, they were unlikely to be encouraged. From the age of three, Georgina King manifested a keen interest in science and in time could so easily have become one of those women who worked on behalf of the scientific male; instead, circumstances made her a rare exception to this rule.

In 1849, the family settled in Sydney where George proved

Portrait of Georgina King
reproduced with permission from the Archives
of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne

a zealous—if not universally respected—rector of the Anglican pro-cathedral. The Kings moved in the best and most literate of circles, and Georgina did not lack for mentors among the colony's scientific elite. Two men in particular stand out: Rev. William Branwhite Clarke, the geologist, and naturalist Dr George Bennett. In the Library's Pictures Collection there is a portrait of Clarke, ancient looking and with a long white 'Old Testament' beard. He was in his fifties when the Kings first met him, and the glory days of field work and gold discovery were well behind him. Clarke's study was lined with scientific books, and contained umpteen display cabinets of minerals and fossils. It was here that the little girl became entranced with the idea of geology.

Bennett, the family physician, was even more of a phenomenon than Clarke. Portraits in the Pictures Collection show him to have been



handsome, both in his youth and in advanced old age. Born in 1804, he was charismatic, thrice married and possessed of boundless zeal in the cause of science. The Library holds first and second editions (1834 and 1836) of the book he wrote as a ship's surgeon—*Wanderings in New South Wales, Batavia, Pedir Coast, Singapore, and China: Being the Journal of a Naturalist in Those Countries, during 1832, 1833, and 1834*. His 1860 *Gatherings of a Naturalist in Australasia: Being Observations Principally on the Animal and Vegetable Productions of New South Wales, New Zealand and Some of the Austral Islands* is also one of the Library's treasures. The doctor's rooms, we learn, were crammed with expertly stuffed exotic animals and birds. Mooruks (or cassowaries) captured in New Britain wandered freely through the house, 'dodging about under the tables, chairs and sofas', and into the kitchen, 'keeping the cook in a state of excitement'. (The 'water-moles' in Bennett's possession were not so lucky. Five weeks after their capture at the end of 1858, the two platypuses were dead.) Georgina, like so many girls of her generation, received no formal education, but it was no wonder she grew up believing that she too could be part of this magical world of science.

Clarke fostered her growing interest in geology and Bennett set her firmly on her path, but encouragement was one thing and achieving success in a male-dominated field proved quite another. Before Dr Bennett died in September 1893, he urged his

protégée to persevere, and this Georgina promised to do. She immediately set about making a name for herself in science, only to find that her gender and lack of qualifications told against her: the only recognised scientific role open to her was that of a collector. It was a task she was able to fulfil with enthusiasm and skill, for she possessed not only energy, but also time and local knowledge. From the early 1890s she sent fossils to Sir Frederick McCoy, Professor of Natural Science at the University of Melbourne, and botanised for Baron Ferdinand von Mueller. Visits to well-connected friends enabled her to gather plants and fossils from the shores of Port Jackson, the Western District of New South Wales and the Blue Mountains. Her forays into the



mountains were no gentle strolls. Wide-ranging rambles took her into deep gullies and onto windswept ridges. Sometime in early spring 1896 the tall, strongly built, redheaded spinster who had turned 51 that June, chanced upon the delightful *Boronia floribunda*—a plant that, although widespread, had been overlooked by collectors for more than 70 years.

A generous mention by the Baron in the scientific literature followed and was to be Georgina King's only recognition in a 'mainstream' scientific journal. If only she had been content with that simple accolade. But, while Georgina might have known her limitations as far as the world of flora

(left) Daisy Bates
Reproduced from *The Passing of the Aborigines* by Daisy Bates
(London: John Murray, 1938)
Pictures Collection

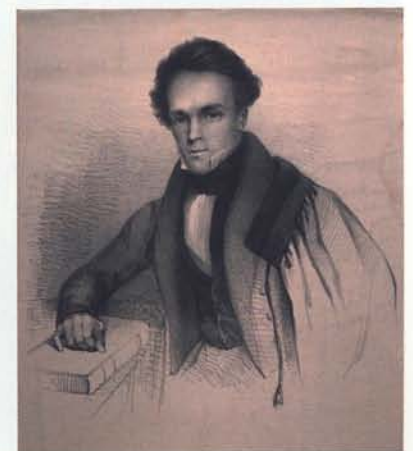
(centre) *The Late Rev. W.B. Clarke, M.A., F.R.S., F.G.S.* [1878?]
lithograph print; 35.8 x 25.8 cm
Pictures Collection, S8923

(below) [*Portrait of Dr George Bennett, F.Z.S.*] [184-?]
lithograph print; 32.2 x 28 cm
Rex Nan Kivell Collection, NK 10170; Pictures Collection, U6334

was concerned, in the case of geology it was quite another matter.

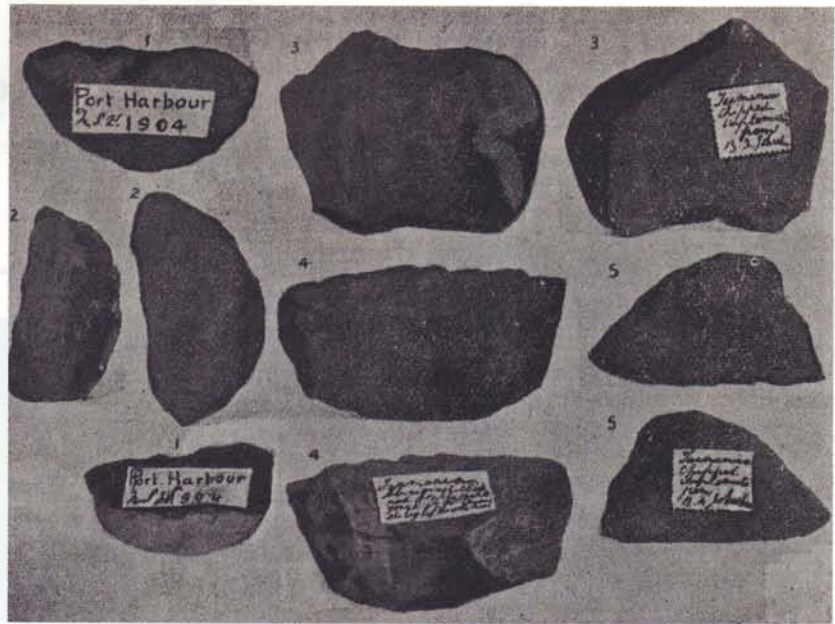
Georgina's sisters had married well, and her brother, Kelso, was a successful businessman with his own establishment. Her aging parents had retired to Homebush and, as the only remaining daughter living at home, Georgina ran the household. It was all very well for such a woman to collect for scientific causes, but when she sought to put her interest in geology on a more formal footing, and posited theories on 'the Occurrence of our Mineral Wealth', her attempts to gain recognition from the (all-male) Royal Society of New South Wales were repeatedly dismissed as ridiculous. Thwarted yet persistent, Georgina was determined to be heard.

Hidden deep within the National Library's pamphlet holdings can be found five slim grey booklets written and privately published by Miss King. The titles range from *The Palaeozoic Carboniferous Formations in New South Wales and the Occurrence of Our Mineral Wealth* (published in 1895, with several subsequent



(right) 'Australian and Tasmanian Chipped Implements'
 Reproduced from *The Antiquity of the Aborigines of Australia and Tasmania; Two Stone Ages in Australia; the Discovery of Gold and How [i.e., Why] It Was Found in Payable Quantities; and Other Articles* by Georgina King (Sydney: Brooks, 1924)
 Pictures Collection

(below) 'The Discovery of the "Missing Link"—the Appearance of Woman as a "Sport" in Nature, and the Evolution of Anthropoid Man'
 Reproduced from *Science of Man and Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society of Australasia*, vol. 5, no. 11, December 1902 (Sydney: G. Watson, 1898–1913)
 Pictures Collection



enlarged editions) to *The Antiquity of the Aborigines of Australia and Tasmania* (1924) and *Evolution: The Discovery of the Missing Link* (1926). Modest in size (the smallest has six pages, the largest 36), the pamphlets are unashamedly 'big' on ideas. Containing articles first published elsewhere in newspapers and journals, they provide undeniable evidence of the writer's mental vitality and eagerness to put her own gloss on new and exciting ideas. Less obviously, they hint at how Georgina King became (and remains) somewhat of a scientific outcast.

She turned her back on the Royal Society to be welcomed enthusiastically by the grand sounding Royal Anthropological Society of Australasia, nowadays seen as forming part of the 'lunatic fringe'. Nursing her wounds—and her grudges—Georgina was fêted by retired South Sea missionaries and some of Sydney's greatest eccentrics. She formed a lasting friendship with Mrs Daisy Bates, no stranger to bitterness herself. Georgina's articles were published (and republished) in the society's journal, *Science of Man*, and, urged on by her new associates, she became ever more outspoken. Before long she was openly mentioning that modern bugbear 'plagiarism' and naming none other than the New South Wales Government Geologist, E.F. Pittman, as the purloiner of her original ideas

(see preface to *The Mineral Wealth of New South Wales*, 1906). By 1911, in a new edition, Professor Edgeworth David, the charismatic and influential Professor of Geology at the University of Sydney (see *National Library of Australia News*, August 1999 and September 2002), was also associated with what was now depicted as a wilful campaign of suppression.

'I have had great pleasure in making my discoveries', she wrote in 1911, discoveries she was told she should 'claim for the sake of all women', but whether she was used (and abused) by the 'professional men' of Sydney is open to question. Year after year Georgina's campaign against the scientific establishment gathered momentum, losing none of its ferocity with the onset of old age, and encouraged by male and female friends alike. Daisy Bates became a staunch supporter, although, alas, the Bates Papers in the National Library's Manuscript Collection fail to reveal any King letters, and a fuller picture of her grievances must be sought elsewhere, in the records she carefully collated and lodged for posterity in Sydney. Thanks to the National Library's copies of her publications, however, we can witness the death of childhood promise and the beginnings of a tragically unfulfilled human life. Here was a woman conditioned to hold expectations far ahead of her time and (whatever we



may think of her theories), for her pioneering efforts and steadfastness in the face of prejudice, we should applaud and honour the memory of Miss Georgina King, whose contribution to this day remains unrecognised by mainstream science.

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